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ABSTRACT

Recent research indicates that a considerable number of children report extreme feelings of loneliness and that unpopular children are more lonely than popular children. The present study assessed feelings of loneliness in two subgroups of unpopular children: those who were rejected (low on positive and high on negative peer nominations) and those who were neglected (low on both positive and negative peer nominations). Data on popular, average, and controversial children were also collected. Results from 200 third- through sixth-grade children indicated that rejected children were the most lonely group and that popular children were the least lonely. Neglected, average, and controversial children reported intermediate levels. Overall, the results provided added evidence of the utility of the distinction between neglected and rejected status and support earlier conclusions that rejected children are more at-risk than other status groups. (Author/RH)

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Children's Loneliness:

A Comparison of Rejected and Neglected Peer Status

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Abstract

Recent research indicates that a considerable number of children report extreme feelings of loneliness and that unpopular children are more lonely than popular children. In the present study, we assessed feelings of loneliness of two subgroups of unpopular children, those who were sociometrically rejected versus those who were neglected. Data on popular, average and controversial children were also collected. Results from 200 third- through sixth-grade children indicated that rejected children were the most lonely group and that popular children were the least lonely. Neglected, average, and controversial children reported intermediate levels. Overall, the results provide added evidence of the utility of the distinction between neglected versus rejected status and provide support for earlier conclusions that rejected children are more "at risk" than other status groups.

Introduction

Although considerable research exists on adults' feelings of loneliness (see Peplau & Perlman, 1982), only recently has attention been directed toward the study of children's loneliness. Asher, Hymel, and Renshaw (in press) developed a loneliness scale for children and studied the relationship of loneliness to sociometric status in the peer group. Results indicated that over 10% of children reported extreme feelings of loneliness, and that unpopular children reported significantly more loneliness than popular children.

The present study extended this initial investigation by comparing the loneliness of different subgroups of unpopular children. Both positive and negative sociometric nomination measures were administered to subclassify unpopular children as either "neglected" (low on positive and on negative nominations) or "rejected" (low on positive nominations but high on negative nominations). Recent research suggests the importance of this distinction in that rejected and neglected children show different behavioral profiles (e.g., Coie, Dodge, & Coppotelli, 1982; Dodge, in press) and rejected status is more stable over time than neglected status (Coie & Dodge, 1983; Coie & Kupersmidt, in press.) Furthermore, earlier research on the long-term predictive validity of sociometric status suggests that negative nominations predict to later life adjustment better than do positive nominations (Cowen, Pederson, Babigian, Izzo, & Trost, 1973; Roff, Sells, & Golden, 1972). Accumulating evidence suggests, then, that rejected children may be more "at risk" than neglected children.

Method

Subjects

Two hundred three children from third through sixth grade participated in the study. The children came from a predominantly middle-class school in a midwestern community. Three children did not fill out the loneliness questionnaire leaving a final sample of 200 children.

Procedure

Three sociometric measures were administered in class: a rating-scale measure, a nomination measure, and a negative nomination measure. Approximately one week after sociometric testing, children were given a loneliness questionnaire in class. The questionnaire was the original Asher et al. instrument, except that each of the 16 primary items was modified to ensure a clear school focus (e.g., "I'm lonely at school" rather than "I'm lonely). Only two items in the original instrument had a clear school focus and this lack of consistent school focus could attenuate the relationship between children's reports of loneliness and status in their school peer group.

In addition to the 16 primary items, the questionnaire contained 8 "filler" items focusing on hobbies and interests. The children responded to each of the 24 items on a 5-point scale in terms of how true each statement was about them (see Table 1 for a list of all items).

Results and Discussion

Descriptive Findings

Table 2 presents information on the percentage of children who responded to each scale point on each item. Averaging across items,

8.4% of the sample responded by checking one of the two most extreme categories in terms of loneliness and social dissatisfaction. This is somewhat lower than in the earlier Asher et al. (in press) study, a finding that could be due to making the questionnaire school specific, or to differences in characteristics of the two samples. Still, the number of children reporting loneliness was considerable and is also comparable to that obtained with a single question in a recent national survey of children in the United States (Zill, in press).

Factor Analysis and Internal Reliability

Children's responses to all 24 questionnaire items were subjected to a factor analysis (quartimax rotation). As in the previous study, the results indicated a primary factor which included all 16 of the loneliness and social dissatisfaction items. Table 3 presents the factor loadings for each scale item and the item-to-total score correlations for each item. Also, as in the previous study, the resulting 16-item scale was found to be internally consistent (Cronbach's Alpha = .90), and internally reliable (Split-half correlation between forms = .80; Spearman-Brown reliability coefficient = .89; Guttman split-half reliability coefficient = .89). Thus, modifying the original instrument to provide a consistent school focus had no adverse effects on the psychometric properties of the measure.

Loneliness and Sociometric Status

Table 4 presents correlations between children's loneliness and three indexes of status in the peer group: average play rating, number of positive nominations, and number of negative nominations. Each of

these sociometric scores were computed and analyzed on the basis of nominations and ratings received from same-sex classmates and from classmates of both sexes. Next, each score was transformed to a standardized score based on the child's score relative to others in the same class, or in the same-sex group within the class. This transformation made it possible to compare scores across classrooms despite differences in class size or in the way children might have distributed their responses on the play-rating scale. Table 4 indicates that children's loneliness was significantly correlated with each index of status. This held for boys and girls and for children of each grade level, as well as for the total sample.

Of particular interest, was the degree of loneliness experienced by children in different status positions. Children were classified based on positive and negative nomination scores as popular, rejected, neglected, controversial, and average. The Coie et al. (1982) approach to classification was used. Table 5 shows the loneliness scores for each group with a high score indicating greater loneliness. Comparisons between groups using the Dunn procedure, indicated that rejected children differed significantly from neglected children, neglected children did not differ significantly from average children, and popular children differed significantly from average children (on same-sex scores only). These results provide added evidence of the value of distinguishing between neglected and rejected status in identifying children as "at risk" in their peer relationships.

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Table 1

Questionnaire Items

1. It's easy for me to make new friends at school.

*2. I like to read.

+3. I have nobody to talk to in my class.

4. I'm good at working with other children in my class.

*5. I watch TV a lot.

+6. It's hard for me to make friends at school.

*7. I like school.

8. I have lots of friends in my class.

+9. I feel alone at school.

10. I can find a friend in my class when I need one.

*11. I play sports a lot.

+12. It's hard to get kids in school to like me.

*13. I like science.

+14. I don't have anyone to play with at school.

*15. I like music.

16. I get along with my classmates.

+17. I feel left out of things at school.

+18. There's no other kids I can go to when I need help in school.

*19. I like to paint and draw.

+20. I don't get along with other children in school.

+21. I'm lonely at school.

22. I am well-liked by the kids in my class.

*23. I like playing board games a lot.

+24. I don't have any friends in class.

*Hobby or interest item.
+Items for which response order was reversed in scoring.

Table 2

Distribution of Children's Responses to Loneliness Items:
Percentage of Children Responding to Each Scale Point (N = 200)

	Always true	True most of the time	Sometimes true	Hardly ever true	Not at all true
It's easy for me to make new friends at school	22.0	36.5	32.5	6.0	3.0
I have nobody to talk to in my class	3.5	5.0	5.0	12.0	74.5
I'm good at working with other children in my class	31.5	42.5	21.0	3.5	1.5
It's hard for me to make friends at school	5.6	4.5	16.2	36.4	37.4
I have lots of friends in my class.	55.5	26.0	10.0	5.0	3.5
I feel alone at school	3.5	5.5	10.0	19.0	62.0
I can find a friend in my class when I need one	55.5	23.5	10.5	4.0	6.5
It's hard to get kids in school to like me	6.0	7.5	13.5	37.5	35.5
I don't have anyone to play with at school	2.0	2.5	10.0	15.0	70.5
I get along with my classmates	31.0	49.5	14.0	3.5	2.0
I feel left out of things at school	4.5	7.5	17.0	27.5	43.5
There's no other kids I can go to when I need help in school	4.0	6.0	13.5	17.0	59.5
I don't get along with other children in school	3.0	3.5	15.0	30.5	48.0
I'm lonely at school	3.5	6.0	8.0	19.5	63.0
I am well-liked by the kids in my class	22.6	50.8	17.6	5.5	3.5
I don't have any friends in class	1.5	2.0	5.5	10.5	80.5

Table 3

Factor Loading for Each Item and the
Correlations of Each Item With the Total Score

Item Number	Factor Loading	Item-to-Total-Score Correlation
1	.45	.54
*3	.61	.54
4	.38	.52
*6	.52	.59
8	.57	.70
*9	.83	.72
10	.47	.57
*12	.53	.59
*14	.79	.65
16	.34	.45
*17	.72	.63
*18	.67	.56
*20	.56	.57
*21	.82	.70
22	.43	.56
*24	.75	.69

*Items for which response order reversed in scoring

Table 4

Correlations of Loneliness

With Same-Sex Status and Both-Sex Status

Status with Same-Sex Peers	
Play Rating	.39*
Positive Nomination	.38*
Negative Nomination	.37*

Status with Both-Sex Peers	
Play Rating	.32*
Positive Nomination	.35*
Negative Nomination	.34*

* $p < .001$

Table 5

Loneliness as Function of Type of Status

Status with Same-Sex Peers		
	M	N
Popular	22.74	27
Rejected	39.84	26
Neglected	27.97	30
Controversial	28.56	9
Average	29.86	57

Status with Both-Sex Peers		
	M	N
Popular	25.36	28
Rejected	37.97	34
Neglected	29.62	32
Controversial	27.18	11
Average	29.31	54